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ABSTRACT

This brief paper on promoting the self-determination of students with severe disabilities begins by identifying barriers to training in self-determination skills, such as a perceived lack of student benefit and insufficient staff training. The question of whether students with severe disability benefit from instruction to promote self-determination is answered by stressing that partial benefits, such as increased independence, are still valuable and can be obtained from learning some self-determination skills. Specific strategies to promote self-determination are then explained including: (1) assessing interests and preferences and promoting choice making; (2) encouraging student participation in educational goal setting and educational planning; (3) involving students in problem solving and decision making; and (4) utilizing student-directed learning strategies. Examples are offered of combining these strategies. The potential of technology to promote independence and self-regulated learning is briefly noted. (DB)

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Promoting the Self-Determination of Students with Severe Disabilities

Michael Wehmeyer

Promoting the self-determination of students with disabilities has become best practice in special education, particularly in promoting more positive transitions from school to post-school life. Promoting self-determination means addressing skills, knowledge, and attitudes students will need to take more control over and responsibility for their lives. While efforts to promote self-determination are in place, most of the methods, materials, and strategies they use do not adequately address the instructional needs of students with severe disabilities (Wehmeyer, 1998).

Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (2000) surveyed 1,200 teachers of students with severe disabilities about their beliefs concerning self-determination and the barriers to providing instruction to promote this outcome. Some of barriers they identified are:

- Lack of student benefit from instruction in self-determination (42%)
- Insufficient training or information on promoting self-determination (41%)
- Lack of authority to provide instruction in this area (32%)
- More urgent need for instruction in other areas (29%)
- Lack of teacher knowledge of curricular/assessment materials and strategies (17%)

This digest addresses several issues raised by this list of barriers to promoting the self-determination of students with severe disabilities.

Can Students with Severe Disabilities Benefit from Instruction to Promote Self-Determination?

The most frequently identified barrier was that teachers did not believe students would benefit from such instruction. This reason is at the heart of a perception that people with severe disabilities cannot be self-determined because of the nature or extent of their impairment (Wehmeyer, 1998). However, such perceptions are based on misperceptions of self-determination as equivalent to being completely independent or autonomous and in absolute control of one's life.

Many students with severe disabilities will not be able to learn all the skills and knowledge needed to solve difficult problems. However, this is equally true for most areas in which students with severe disabilities receive instruction, a situation that has been dealt with by the principle of partial participation (Baumgart et al., 1982). This principle states that even if a student cannot do all steps in a task or activity, he or she can likely learn at least one step and maximize his or her participation.

There are portions of even complex tasks such as decision-making or problem-solving in which students with severe disabilities can participate, thus making them more self-determined. For example, the expression of a preference is an important part of decision-making and all people, independent of the severity of their disability, can express preferences and make choices.

There is also research to support that using self-directed learning strategies enhances students' autonomy and independence (Agran, 1997). Promoting skills that enable students with severe disabilities to become more independent, even if they are not fully independent, can improve quality of life (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Students with severe disabilities can become more self-determined, even if they won't become fully autonomous.

Strategies to Promote Self-Determination

Assess Interests and Preferences and Promote Choice Making. Promoting active choice making is the primary way teachers address self-determination for students with severe disabilities. Making a choice involves the identification and communication of a preference. For students with severe disabilities, there are multiple barriers to making choices. Because many such students have too few opportunities, they do not know how to make choices and need targeted, direct instruction in this skill. Other students with severe disabilities do not express their preferences though conventional means and teachers must use alternative means to assess personal preferences.

Hughes, Pitkin, and Lorden (1998) reviewed the literature on strategies to determine preferences of students with severe disabilities. Strategies they identified included:

- Infer preferences from a student's behavior when a student responds to situations in which choices are presented.
- Use computer and micro-switch technology to enable students to indicate preferences.
- Observe whether students approach an object when it is presented as a choice.
- Consider a wide range of verbal, gestural, and other communicative efforts as a means to determine preference.
- Record the amount of free time a student spends engaged in particular activities.

Additionally, a student's family will have considerable knowledge regarding a student's preferences, and teachers should take advantage of this resource.

Student Participation in Educational Goal Setting and Educational Planning. Self-determined behavior is goal directed. Students with severe disabilities can, and should, participate in goal setting. Agran, Blanchard, and Wehmeyer (2000) taught teachers of 19 students with severe disabilities to teach their students to set and reach transition-related goals. They provided supports to enable students to answer four questions leading to setting an educational goal: What do I want to learn? What do I know about it now? What must change for me to learn what I don't know? What can I do to make this happen? Although many students could not articulate direct responses to each question, teachers used the questions as focal points for planning activities that promoted active student involvement in goal setting.

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For example, when addressing the question "What do I want to learn?" teachers helped students identify personal preferences in transition (work, living, recreation). Students became active partners in goal setting, and teachers and students worked diligently to ensure that goals were linked to student preferences, interests, and abilities. Teachers then taught students self-directed learning strategies (discussed below) that enabled them to participate in the instructional process as well. Students were successful in achieving their goals.

A process commonly used to involve students with severe disabilities in educational planning is person-centered planning. Compared to typical planning processes, person-centered planning emphasizes identifying the dreams and visions of the student and his or her family; creating teams of stakeholders that include the student, family members, and educators as well as other people who are important in the student's life (neighbors, employer); and generating educational plans that emphasize the student's abilities and preferences and identifying supports in the community to achieve goals related to these plans. Such efforts are ideal for actively involving students in goal setting, as well as in educational problem solving and decision-making.

Involvement in Problem Solving and Decision Making. Solving problems and making decisions often require complex cognitive skills. However, each of these tasks can be divided into smaller steps, and students with severe disabilities can learn skills that enable them to complete each step more independently and, thus, enhance their involvement in the more complex task.

The decision-making process involves identifying options; identifying consequences from each option; assessing the risk associated with each consequence; examining how each option coincides with personal preferences, interests, and needs; and making a judgment about which option is optimal. Many students with severe disabilities can be taught, through role modeling and other strategies, to contribute to the process of generating options and can increase their knowledge about consequences associated with options through personal experiences and instruction. All students have preferences, and all students can become more involved in comparing decision-options with personal preferences. Decision-making ends with making a choice, and students with severe disabilities can be involved in that step.

Student-Directed Learning Strategies. Student-directed learning strategies, alternatively referred to as self-regulated learning or self-management strategies, involve teaching students to modify and regulate their own behavior. Such strategies enable students to regulate their own behavior, without external control and allow students to become active participants in their own learning. There is considerable research evidence that many students with severe disabilities can learn and use self-directed learning strategies to promote independence and improved task performance (Agran, 1997). There are many such strategies, but the primary ones include teaching students to:

- Independently perform a task by following a set of pictures or other visual or auditory cues (antecedent cue regulation).
- Make task-specific statements out loud prior to performing a task (self-instruction).
- Observe and record own performance of a target behavior or action (self-monitoring).
- Compare the behavior being monitored with own desired goal (self-evaluation).
- Provide reinforcement upon successful completion of a task (self-reinforcement).

These strategies are typically used in combination. For example, a student with severe disabilities could be taught to perform a vocational task more independently through a simple self-instruction strategy such as the "Did-Next-Now" strategy, in which the student learns how to complete a task sequence by stating what response he or she just completed, what needs to be done next, and then directing himself or herself to perform the response. Then, the student could be taught to make a checkmark on a graph sheet next to a picture of the task (self-monitoring) when the task is finished. After three weeks the student can be taught to count total checkmarks (self-evaluation) and, if they total a predetermined amount, to engage in a reinforcing activity such as computer free time (self-reinforcement). The variations on these scenarios are limitless. For example, you could substitute teaching a student to perform a task by looking at a picture sequence (antecedent cue regulation) in the previous sequence if the student cannot adequately self-instruct. If counting check marks on a graph page are too complex, students can put a marble in a glass jar until it reaches a certain line as the self-evaluation component.

It is also important to consider technology's potential to promote independence and self-regulated learning for students with severe disabilities. Available technologies such as handheld personal computers are being used to promote independent performance and to decrease student reliance on others to perform tasks, thus enhancing self-determination (Davies, Stock, & Wehmeyer, 2002).

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